THE PEACH KING

By DAY ALLEN WILLEY

HE sat in the club car in the seat next to me, his traveling cap tipped back on his forehead, and his keen eyes gazing out of the window. We were both smoking; but my cigar burned out, as my mind was set on something else. Knocking the ashes off the tip of his weed, he turned it to me:

"Have a light."

That started the forty-mile an-hour acquaintance. He asked me where I was going.

"Down South."

"What for?"

"Oh, just to see what it looks like, what they can raise down there."

This opened his heart. "How would you like to see a peach orchard a mile long? I'm on the way there now to see Molumphy."

"Who's he?"

"A Connecticut Irishman that knows all about how to grow peaches that make your mouth water, and how to keep niggers hustling."

Then he asked me my name. I gave it to him. He looked me in the face and said:

"You're talking to Georgia Hale."

I thought a minute. Then I remembered he was the one they called the Peach King down South. I had seen his picture, and knew who he was after a close study of his face.

"I'd like to see that mile of peaches."

"All right, we'll go together."

That started him to talking, and I listened to every word. Peaches were his hobby. I began to ask him questions. I knew that the man with the big orchard was a Connecticut Yankee who had been trying to cover the State of Georgia with peach trees.

"How did you do about help down South?

"Used the darkies—best people in the world when you get 'em going properly. I couldn't ask for better hands.

"But you never employed them up North."

"No; we have Italians. They do well; but I am satisfied with the Georgia labor. It's all right. Before I went South I heard that a nigger and a mule could do more to raise good corn than a white man and two horses. That's probably so; but there's an old darky and a mule on my place that I will back against a civil engineer for doing things straight."

"How's that?"

WELL, they saved me the cost of hiring a surveyor. I'll tell you how it was. My trees are set in blocks. Some of the rows are over a mile long. I engaged an engineer at five dollars a day and board. Luckily I hired him by the day and gave him a boy to carry the instruments. He began work on Monday morning running his lines. Of course the hands watched every move he made. One of them was an old fellow we called Henry Wilson. Henry had been plowing over some stubble fields where part of the trees were to be planted.

"That night Henry came up to me and said, 'Cap'n, how much do you pay dat man for lookin' through dat spyglass and writin' in dat book? They say he's fixin' places fer you to set out trees.'

"'I pay him five dollars a day, Henry. He's a surveyor to make straight lines.'

"'Deed, Cap'n, seems to me it's pow'ful lot o' money wasted. Why, dat ole white mule o' mine can plow a furrow straight as he can do it.'

"'I'm afraid not, Henry,' said I. 'It has to be a mile long.'

"'Dat's all right, Cap'n—jest you let me and de mule try once and see if we can't.'

"Well, he'd nearly finished the stubble, and so I told him he could start in the next morning in another part of the orchard site from where the surveyor was working. About noon I went over to see how Henry was getting on. You may not believe it, but he had actually plowed a furrow that did not seem to be a foot out of the way to my eye. We afterward measured with instruments, and found it nearly straight. That was all the surveying I needed, and at night I paid the engineer and let him go. I asked Henry how he did it.

"'Easy 'nough. I jest gits de mule pointed de right way, den I looks 'tween de mule's ears and gits a point on some tree or house or shed, den I tells de mule to go—and we goes.'

I HAVE been in orchards all the way from Lake Ontario to Florida, and never saw trees run in straighter rows. Why, the superintendent can smoke his pipe on the veranda roof of his house and see the hands cultivating at the end of the orchard between the rows, they are so even! But there's another thing about the place that's more surprising. I found when I started in that when a darky is singing loudest he'll work the hardest; so I organized what we called the Red Label Band, and during the harvest time it plays in the packing house. The band plays with a few horns, one or two fiddles, including what country people call a 'bull fiddle,' a mouth organ or so, and a few other instruments. You can hear it quite a distance out in the orchard, and when it starts up a jig you ought to see those darkies hustle!

"They can't keep still, and each tries to get ahead of the other. They rush the fruit into the packages, nail them and clench them, and hurry them into the cars as if they were getting double wages. I've got some boys down there who I'll wager can nail a package faster than any other man or boy alive. I have one who nailed a box in nine seconds,—more than a nail a second. What do you think of that?

"Those people love music. If they can't hear it from someone, they'll make it as well as they can. Why, I don't know but I get double the work out of them when they hear the band than at other times: not that they are lazy; for I never paid wages to a more faithful lot of people. I could tell another story on that which would open your eyes.

ONE season just before harvest I was sent for by my orchard superintendent in New England. I did not want to go, as it was a time when the trees needed close watching; but they wired me that I must come if only for a week. We had a man who had been on the place all his life; was a slave of the man from whom I bought it and had stuck to his old master after he was free. Sam Johnson was a sort of foreman under Molumphy and really understood the care of trees about as well as any negro I ever had.

"The day I went away I sent for Sam and Henry Wilson. 'Boys,' I said, 'I've got to leave you for a week or so, and I want to know if you will look out for things and keep the hands working all right while I'm away. It's a pretty big thing, all these trees to look after. Do you think you can?'

"'Don't you worry, Cap'n," said Sam. 'Me and Henry'll see to everything and keep dose niggers goin'. Jest you start and don' mind a bit: we'll tend to it.'

"Well, I made the trip, and hurried back as soon as I could. Apparently they had kept their word. The trees were in good shape. The stock was well fed, and the house undisturbed. I had told Henry Wilson he could sleep in the kitchen while I was gone. When I entered the kitchen there stood an old army musket in one corner which I knew he used for rabbit hunting. It had a double load of slugs, and was capped ready for business.

"'Henry, what did you bring this around for?' said I.

"'Why, Cap'n, me and Sam thought as how some no-'count niggers or white trash might hear of you goin' way and try to steal somethin'; so I jest told Sam I'd take de ole gun and stay round nights till de boys come to milk and git ready de plow mules. But nobody come, Cap'n. It's all right.'"

I WANTED to go down to Fort Valley to mail some letters. Hale said he wanted to go to the box factory where he got his peach crates. We got about a mile away, when I saw a house shining with its new coat of paint. On the front steps of the porch sat three big fat colored brethren smoking their pipes. With their long black coats and white neckties it struck me that they were camp meeting orators.

"Are those preachers?"

"Yes."

"They seem to be having a good time."

"They ought to be. That's our religious boarding house. These preachers are given their board and lodging to keep our coons from running away in harvest time to go to camp meetings. I went down to hunt them up, and when they came to see me I made a bargain with them. I told the preachers, 'If you will keep the niggers on this place in order, and stop having your camp meetings when the peaches are ripe, I will give you a house to live in and have a mammy to cook for you.'" Then Hale relighted his pipe.

That's how the Red Label negroes were kept on the job. The Peach King knew how.

STRUGGLE

Before life's real pleasures, for which we strive,
Are reached, what trying dangers we must share!
Is honey what we want? Then we must dare
The bayonets of the army of the hive.

—Translated from the Arabic of Al-Motenebbi by Salim Y. Alkazin